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The Workshop

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ECCLESIASTICAL ART.

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In accordance with the nature and design of «The Workshop», it is not Religious Art in general that I propose to speak of in the present article, but I shall rather confine myself to those objects which it is the province of Art Industry to furnish for Churches, especially the altarcloths, vestments, vessels and other furniture. The higher arts of Church architecture, of religious painting and sculpture I shall either pass over altogether, or merely touch upon them incidentally.

Ecclesiastical art! Is these then a special art for the Church directly opposed to that for domestic and secular purposes? We are speaking of a Religious art, and understand by that term none other than that which has for its task the production of religious objects. We are speaking of a Christian art, which seeks in those objects its own artistic peculiarities. The fact that Christianity requires for certain innate feelings which are peculiar to it, a greath depth and strength of expression, has not however given birth to any special style of art, those signs and symbols which it has, and has had from its commencement being, artistically speaking, but as the letters of the alphabet in writing. In the most extensive sense of the word Christian art stands opposed to that of the Mahometan world in most important and significant differences, but in this sense it embraces both the sacred and the secular, and includes an entire history of the development of several different styles.

By ecclesiastical art then we understand simply and solely that art whose task it is to produce objects for the use of the Church; just as little as there is a pe-

culiar style of art for secular things, so little is there one for the Church. If therefore we wish to be exact, we should speak only of ecclesiastical art objects and not of ecclesiastical art. These objects have no peculiar style, no peculiar technic, and if they in any degree display peculiar forms, these are such as result from their especial destination and use, or such as the conservatism of the Church has preserved, while the world has had its transitions to other forms in its more rapid changes of taste.

This idea of ecclesiastical art is however now disputed, and indeed just by those who are endeavouring to improve it, and with whom we have many ideas in common. They desire an especial style for the Church and its furniture, and would have it in entire contrast to secular, or, more properly speaking, general art. How this conclusion, so opposed to history und reason has been arrived at we shall presently see.

We must premise that it is especially of art in the Catholic Church that we are speaking in this article; for it is undeniable that it has here a far higher importance than in other confessions. For catholicism art is a necessity; protestantism can dispense with it though it does not refuse its aid. On the contrary, within the last twenty years and more there has arisen in the protestant churches a praiseworthy desire for the cooperation of art in the awakening and edification of christian life. But this is but a mere echo in comparison of the loud and clear voice of catholicism. Protestantism indeed contents itself with what art in general will produce for it, and

as it requires for its functions but little splendour, and altogether rejects the priestly vestments, so for the present and most probably for the future it is a matter of indifference whether its furniture and vessels bear a Byzantine, Romanesque or modern stamp.

England only, and that but partially, forms an exception. As here in her numerous new churches, the Gothic style finds acceptance more than elsewhere, much has been transferred from it in their appointments, namely in the stalls, coronæ and standards, altar vessels and furniture, and all the wood and metal work. Many of the Anglican clergy, whose leaning is towards catholicism, would rejoice to substitute the coloured and richly embroidered vestments of the Catholic church for their simple black and white robes. But no principle is yet established in England from the Gothic style of ecclesiastical furniture, as has been the case with the catholic clergy. The English will not have it so.

That ecclesiastical art, in this sense of the term has now become an important consideration for catholicism and therefore for Art industry, is the natural consequence of events. The movement which produced it was only too well founded on the state of things.

More than some twenty years ago, when this movement was begun by some intelligent lovers of art among the catholic clergy in some Rhenish cities, all those articles which pertain to the furniture and service of the church were, as objects of art, of the most miserable kind. Putting aside all demands for a determinate style, it would at least be expected, if art were to enter at all into these things and if the church did not despise what art can offer, that these objects should be noble in form, and in their appearance und effect worthy their high destination. If outward show was to be used at all, it should not be coarse or common; if the clergy appeared before the altar and in public in coloured gold-embroidered vestments, these should be something above mere vulgar ornaments.

And it is this very fault which is seen in the appointments of the church and the dress of the clergy, and that in a degree which is not observable in other departments of Art industry of the same period. Outwardly the church had become more worldly than the world itself, which in proportion as it increased in nobility, rejected outward show, perhaps even more than was right or necessary. The church itself took up the most extreme means of outward display, and applied it in the coarsest and most ignoble manner. Let us consider only the case of the altar and the appearance it now for the most part presents. Originally a table, and through the whole of the middleage, a moveable piece of furniture, it became in the time of the Renaissance an architectural structure. A wall of stone was erected behind the Lord's Table. Column over column with carved capitals, ponderous stone entablature, arches and pediments formed a rich architectonic design. To this were added all the wild extravagancies of the Rococo period: the ground plan was of curved lines, the columns twisted and wreathed, the pediments broken and curved, clouds

and draperies of stone surrounded and encumbered the structure; troops of puffy-cheeked and pot-bellied cherubims rode upon the clouds, while on the columns and gables were placed the figures of Saints in the most affected and impossible positions.

These expensive absurdities were indeed modified with time. The eighteenth century, towards its close especially, became less addicted to and more sparing of these costly works of art. But the style and its eccentricities still remained, and when an altar of this kind was not constructed in stone or varicoloured marble, it was made of wood and painted in oil to imitate the beloved stone.

After this stone altar, and as an outgrowth and successor of that surcharged erection, came a wooden one, which was seldom of such architectural pretensions as its predecessor, as it did not take its place in the richer and more magnificent churches. For this reason, perhaps, it surrounded itself with a host of carved ornaments, wild, excentric and hideous as only the Rococo style could produce. Life-sized figures also, in the style of the period were not wanting, and all were polished and gilded, the Saints' clothes coloured and varnished, so that they shone like tinsel. These were a grand delight to the eyes of the people. Even at the present time the same thing may be seen in the freshly renewed gilding and overlaying of the clothes with red, green and blue tinsel.

And the priests before these altars, what sort of a figure did they present? The vestments which before allowed a certain stately flow with fewer but large folds, were by degrees so cut and snipped that they looked like a flat board covering back and front. Then, besides being shortened they were also stiffened, and a quantity of gold trimming superadded which greatly impeded movement. Then still more embroidery was added, which was equally out of place: the threads drawn over the stiff material beneath formed a strong relief on the surface, which might easily break, but which was a great hindrance to genuflection.

Still worse was the design and style of the ornaments: if the massive appearance of the woven and embroidered gold, the glitter of which was still more increased by intermediate layers of burnished gold, made but a poor impression, the design helped to make it still more poor. The salient forms of these gold decorations were broad, unmeaning scrolls of the baroque period, flattened out building ornaments and the fly-away lines of the rococo. Among these, were naturalistic flowers and wreaths, such as were in vogue in the eighteenth century, the whole presenting nothing special or peculiar to the church, but rather of secular origin, and for church use still more secularised, more ignoble, more tawdry.

These naturalistic designed flowers were also for the most part executed in gold, but partly in colours, whether woven by machine or hand. These last, which ought never to be employed, except where the loom-work ceases or can no longer suffice, made bad still

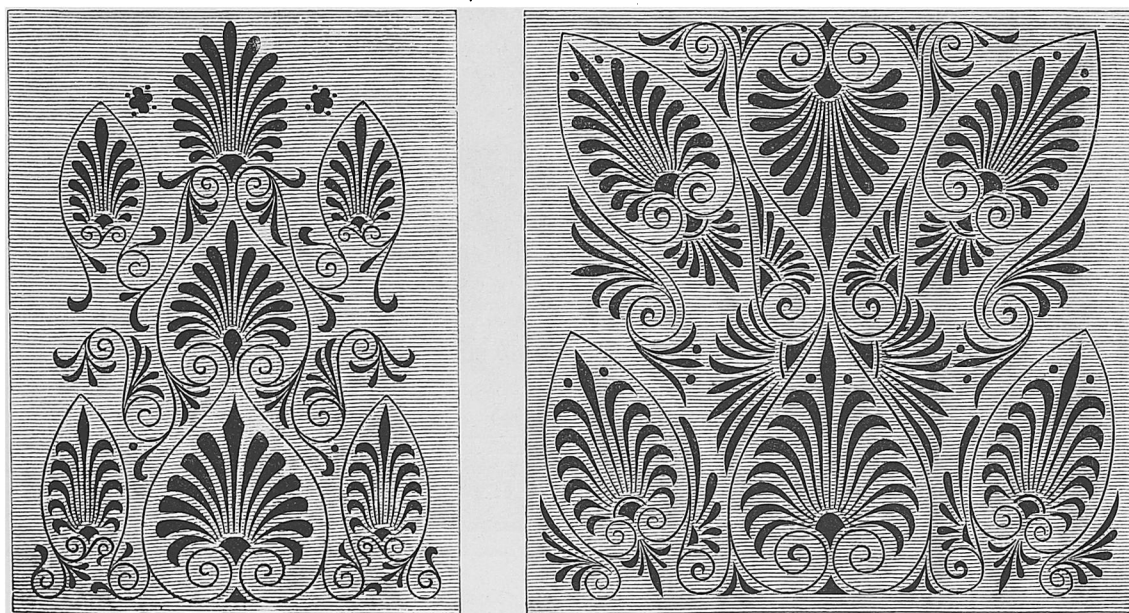
worse. Not so in former times, for the most costly vestments which mediæval times and even the first period of the Renaissance have bequeathed to us, are those in which embroidery is combined with loom-work and which, by their figures and ornaments become real works of art. But for such works there is needed not only a clever hand, well skilled in design, but also an artistic technic, which alone can produce such perfection. But this technic had long died out, and was succeeded by the most intolerable methods of amateurs, among which the cross-stitch stands first, and with which no works like those of old could be produced. In addition to this, not only the technic but the handwork of amateurs came into play. Pious and highborn ladies devoted their time in this way to the church, and presented the clergy with embroidered vestments, carpets and altar-cloths, on which the most fearfully naturalistic flowers disported to the confusion of all technic, and with the most brilliant lack of taste in colours. Thus all that was bad was heaped together; bad forms, bad design, vulgar ornament, tawdry gilding and colouring out of all taste. And although something better is seen at present, it is a state of things which has by no means passed away, and many frightful examples may be constantly seen in every procession, and every exhibition of the works of catholic ladies' associations.

I will not describe in a similar manner the vessels of gold and silver of the last century and of the present

time which are destined for the use of the altar, or other parts of the church. I will only just remark, that all the more delicate works of the goldsmith's art, which found their noblest employment in the church's service are now fallen into disuse and forgotten, or at least are no longer to be seen in our churches. And what have we in their stead? Nothing but the glitter of polished gold and large pieces of coloured glass, with which the modesty of the genuine jewels can not compete; all that seems to be desired is to dazzle the age with the glitter of great masses of gold. Of this ecclesiastical style the most striking and characteristic examples are the monstrances, which formerly contained the object of worship in most artistically executed caskets but are now surrounded by broad flaming rays of gilded metal. Can anything in art be imagined more disgracefully aiming at effect by mere outward show?

Such being the state of ecclesiastical art in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was no wonder that a time came, for come it of necessity must, that it should be looked into; for it called for improvement, for change, for an entire transformation of all the above named objects. It was, as we have remarked above, the catholic clergy, and especially those of the Rhenish provinces, with whom, feeling their own unworthy and undignified appearance, as well as that of the vessels and furniture they had to use, the movement began.

SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



Nos 1 and 2. Specimens of Painting on Grecian Vases.